



Hristo Arnaudov

# ARBANASSI







Library CULTURAL HISTORICAL HERITAGE

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 **SLAVONA**



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Arbanassi is situated on a picturesque highland plateau 4 kilometers north east from the city of Turnovo, itself an old capital in previous times, and 230 kilometers east from the current modern capital of Sofia. To the northeast is the beautiful valley of the Yantra river, to the southwest a great panoramic view of the old capital Turnovo and the majestic Balkan Ranges.

The climate is mild southern European, but with four well defined seasons. Combine this with clean crisp air, many natural mineral water springs, huge old growth forests, good roads, communications, renown hospitality - and Arbanassi becomes a must see experience for any Bulgarian visitor.

But what is it about this village, with a population today of just over 500 people, that makes it so special? Every settlement has its history, of course, but Arbanassi has something unique in its past, reflected in the many remaining houses, churches and artifacts now held in the National Trust. It was a comparatively short era by world historical perspectives, but one that showed Christian art and culture flourishing at a time when the whole of southeastern Europe was under the Muslim rule of the great Ottoman Empire.



*Fresco from the "the Church of the Birth of Christ" 16th C.*



Much of the periods heritage has not survived, especially after 1798 when an army of over 120,000 soldiers of the Husein Pasha raided Arbanassi on their way to the city of Vidin, leaving the village plundered and desolate. What has survived has been faithfully restored and now preserved, and gives us a great deal of knowledge about that past era, its people, their art and culture.

## **How did Arbanassi begin?**

The earliest references to Arbanassi are found at the end of the 14th century and early 15th century, at a time when Bulgaria along with most



*Arbansi house, 17thC.*



of southeastern Europe was within the Ottoman Empire, and it was noted as a prized holding amongst the highest officers and Viziers of the Empire.

In 1541 it came into the possession of Grand Vizier Rustem Pasha. A Croation by origin, he became a convert to Islam, and following a marriage to a daughter of Sultan Suleiman the First, rapidly rose in power

and status to ultimately become a Grand Vizier. Exercising the vast and unquestioned powers such a position provided, Rustem Pasha took control of the region containing Arbanassi, and perhaps due to his special liking of the village, not just for its strategic value, decreed that Arbanassi become a "Dervendgisko" ( from the Turkish "dervent" meaning "passage").

This required the people of Arbanassi to provide guards and guides for a nearby pass through the mountains for both the army and trade convoys in what was still a dangerous and inhospitable ( to the Turkish ) region. In a further grant of independence, the people of Arbanassi were relieved of taxes and other forfeitures to the army, and extraordinarily, given permits to



*Interior of Arbenasi house 17th C.*





carry arms and weapons.

In an Ottoman accounting book from 1582 is found the registration of Arbanassi (and three other nearby villages) as a "Vakuf" by Rustem Pasha, meaning that all the assets and real estate would be left in perpetuity

to be used in religious and charitable works, and much of the income of those villages had been used in the construction of mosques, schools and public buildings in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Tsarigrad, later known as Constantinople, and today as Istanbul.

But perhaps the most extraordinary change in the status of Arbanassi is to be found in a Fermen ( a Sultans written order or decree ) issued by the Sultan Mahmud the Second in which it states - "The Raia population ( tax payers of non Muslim origin or faith ) of the



Icon depicting a "Ktitor" of the Church



Vakuf ( of Rustem Pasha ) are now given right to autonomous self government as free citizens, and are considered forgiven and freed from government and state taxes. Outsiders, whether they be officers of the state or army, shall have no sway or interference within the territory of that Vakuf."

This from a government and occupying empire that usually crushed any form of political or social uprising for such freedoms without mercy. What was the reason for this special relationship?

Perhaps a clue is from the very multi-cultural ethnic backgrounds of the earliest inhabitants, their names revealing Slovenian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian and Moldovan cultures, unified by a single language and writing in Greek, and a shared belief in the Christian faith. But more importantly they were people experienced in the ways of the world as

*View from a house over Arbanasi*







*View through an entrance to another house in Arbanasi 18th C.*

it was then, and perhaps they were more sophisticated in their interaction with the Ottoman rulers of the time than others?

This is part of the unique mystery of Arbanassi - as to how a Christian settlement existed and receive such unusual treatment and status from the Ottoman Empire, develop and flourish. And flourish it did.

### **The Progress of Arbanassi**

With such an advantageous status, freedom from onerous taxation, security, and in later years guarantees of private property, its climate and wonderful location, Arbanassi was obviously an attractive place to live. So much so we see from existing documents that in 1541 there were 150 "taxpayers", that number growing tenfold over following years.

That wonderful location provided one of the major businesses in the beginning of Arbanassi. In early Spring traders from Arbanassi would travel the entire Empire, buying the very best livestock of all types and return



them to the lush pastures around the hills and mountains of Arbanassi for the summer. By late Autumn these very well fed animals would be in the "Salhani" or slaughterhouse, the meat being processed into a variety of products, the fats into candles and soap, the hides into high quality leathers for local craftsmen.

Not only did the people of Arbanassi produce such goods, they also created an active commodity market, and by stockpiling certain commodities, they could obtain the best prices in a bad season elsewhere in the known world. To the point where in 1714, Tsarigrad (Constantinople) was experiencing a dire shortage of tallow and butter. The Sultan himself sent a personally written message to the merchants of Arbanassi to "Please sell immediately at your best price these required commodities, and place them on my ships to be brought forthwith to the Capital!"

Around the 17th century there was a great development in silkworm farming, Arbanassi soon becoming a large exporter of fine quality silk. But it was trade itself which was becoming the core of Arbanassi's growth and wealth. From existing official documents it is clear that



*Another mural of Patrons of the Church*





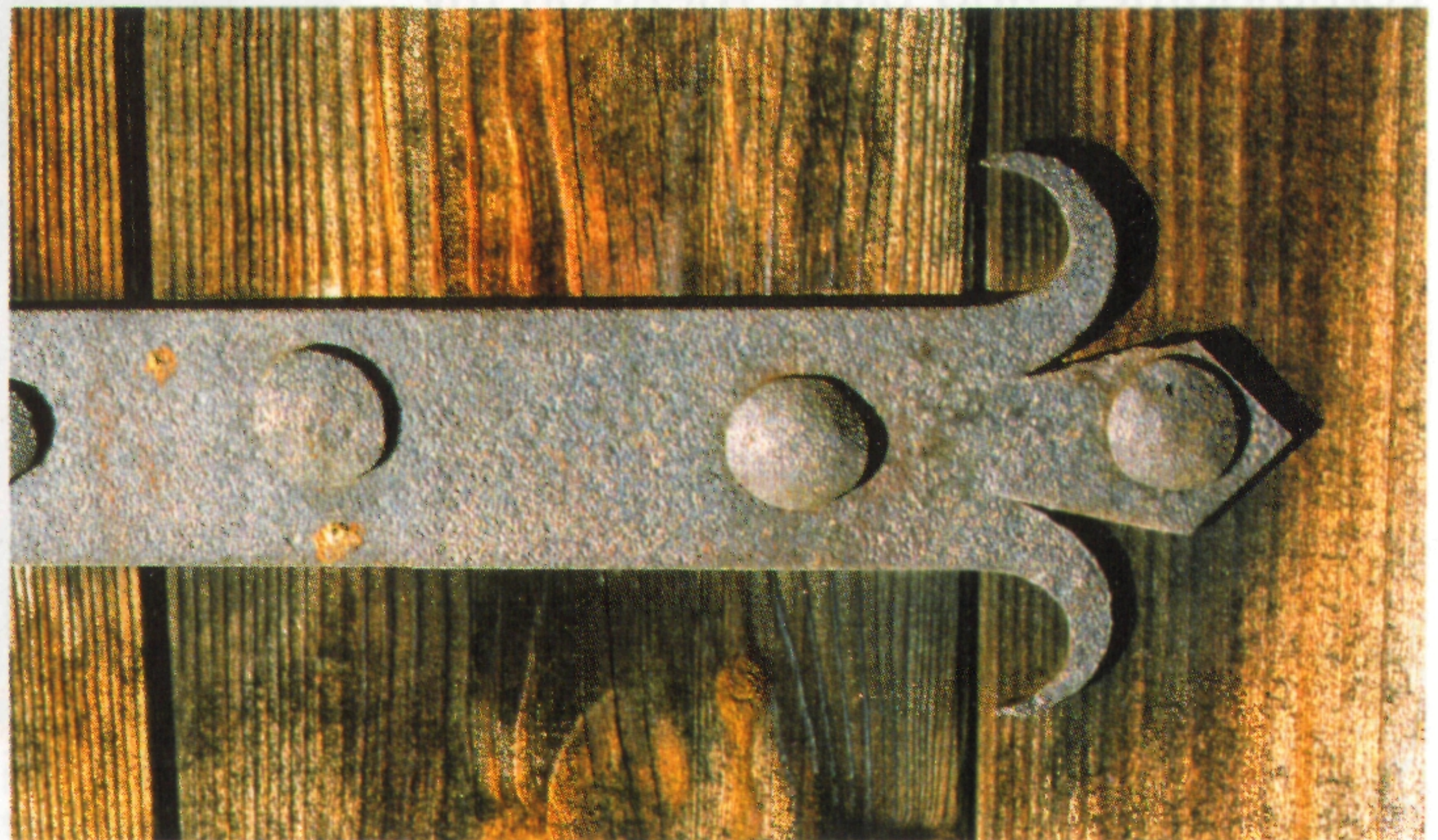
*Interior of typical Arbanasi house*

Buzutci had by 1695 established one of the largest trading groups in this region. By the end of the century, Poland was also a large trading partner.

To the south, as natural Greek speakers, markets were opened with great rapidity in Greece and the many

Arbanassi merchants were highly active in International trading.

To the North, trade was well established with Romania, the Ukraine, and especially Transylvania, whose King George Rakotci granted rights to form partnerships, (or companies in today's language) to citizens of Arbanassi within Transylvania. Two men from Arbanassi, Andrei Arnavukelie and Georg







*18th C. Arbanasi house*

islands in the Mediterranean, and from 1639, Evastiu Platzgu was the director of one of the largest trading companies in Greece, joined later in 1644 by Zotos Nikokincitis another well known Arbanassi trader. Hristo Dabitany, Kosta Zotu and Isarie Hotu, all from Arbanassi were well known as powerful corporate traders throughout the region.

All of this activity did not go unrecognized by the other great civilizations of the period, especially Rome, with Bishop Antonio Stefani writing in a report to the Pope in 1685 - " these people (from Arbanassi) are natural traders and astute business people, having already established not only business with our own principalities in Italy, but also roam as far afield as



Hungary, Poland and Russia, and it has been brought to my attention the name of Dimitur Hintinlata from Arbanassi, who has active trade with India and Persia! We would do well to stay informed of these people."

With international trade comes international money, and from this period that meant gold coinage, so Arbanassi became an active centre for currency exchange, and of course speculation on values of that currency.

This is a precursor of todays futures markets, and then as now, huge profits



*One of the first primary schools in Arbanasi*





were made on such speculation between the major cities of the Empire and beyond. Such was the strength of the trade that Arbanassi was allowed to issue paper "letters of credit", contracts and other certificates of value, and deal in moneylending. Remarkable enough for such a small town, but when its noted the names of women such as Elena and Mahie were active in such trade, the special status of Arbanassi in a Moslem world is only further confirmed.

A particular story may illustrate the sorts of wealth that Arbanassi contained, and its special relationship with the Muslim capital. In 1688 and 1689 around the Turnovo region, probably within a thirty to forty kilometer radius around Arbanassi, preparations were made for an uprising against the Ottoman

*Portraits of women of Arbanasi 17th C.*



invaders and Empire. This ultimately did not go on without the attention of the Ottoman rulers, and subsequent investigations and searches uncovered a huge cache of weapons within Arbanassi itself. While there is no indication that the people of Arbanassi were involved, one must remember that such activities would have normally led to terrible retribution and wholesale execution of entire villages, as had happened in other parts of the Empire.

But Arbanassi quickly sent its sincere apologies, along with 20,000 gold coins, literally a king's ransom in those times, directly to the Sultan. No more was ever heard of the matter between the Ottoman ruler and the people of Arbanassi.



*Exterior walls around house*



Not so probably for the unfortunate people in the surrounding region who would have paid a much more terrible price for such covert activities against the Ottoman state.

## **Cultural Development in Arbanassi**

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Naturally, not all of the people of Arbanassi were involved in trade, but with prosperity came the demand for goods and services, and many craftsmen and women made their way to the town to provide the required foodstuffs,



*Typical front gate*

*House of a well known Arbanassi merchant*



clothing, shoes, ceramic products, gold and silver smithing, jewelry making, decorative and other forms of art. Due to the comparative wealth of its citizens, most of the surviving artifacts from the time indicate an emphasis on quality, and this would have only enhanced the reputation of the town within the region.

Most importantly, people require places to live in, and so architects and builders were in high demand in Arbanassi, and this is the most visible legacy that remains today of this unique town.

In 1640, Catholic Bishop Peter Bogdanov writes in a letter that -

" There, up in the mountains from which you can see Turnovo, there are at least 1,000 fine houses of good construction".

In the tradition of the times the houses were massively built with stone, with high stone walls around the perimeter, which then formed the narrow labyrinth of streets around the town. The town itself has no defined centre, or village square within its layout, but notable public areas are the public fountains and springs, laid in stone, which in a society where the horse was highly valued, would have provided an area for casual meetings and discussion while watering the horses. Two of these places well preserved are the "Konska Chishma" and the "Parzarska Chishma"

The architectural look of the houses in Arbanassi is a practical mixture of Balkan building traditions to suit the climate, the everyday requirements of the times for food storage and animal stabling, and the blending of the many cultural aesthetic influences particular to the region.

The main house is sited within the walled perimeter, with other structures,





*House of a well known Arbanasi merchant*



facing a large courtyard. Entry to the courtyard was through heavy wooden gates in two parts, the smaller for pedestrian use, the larger for horses, carts and livestock. Just inside the gates were small niches for guards and watchmen.

To one side of the courtyard would be the agricultural buildings and stables, the other the main residential structure. The house was usually of a two storey design, with the ground floor massively constructed of stone, providing the cellar, pantry and storage areas, and hidden or secret rooms for hiding goods and even people in times of danger. The second floor is a large spacious area functional for family living, reached by two types of staircase, one more formal the other for services. The rooms were divided into again formal and service types, with bedroom and guest rooms set apart from the rest of the house. (Some houses having both summer guest rooms and winter guest rooms.) Heating was provided by large built in fireplaces contained within the walls. Decoration was varied, with carved wood popular, or rendered walls providing the backdrop for wool, fabric and ceramic ornaments.

From the period, the best surviving examples are - Konstantcalievata (8), Hadgilievata (9), the homes of Kandilarovi (11), Nuku Kultuki (13), Na Baba Kali (12) Hadji Pop Paniot (10) and of these Konstantcaleivata is the most original. Built in the 17th century, with some slight alterations in later times, the huge ground floor contains guard and hiding rooms, cellars, stables, main and secondary staircases. The main door is a massive metal and wood framed structure, with special locks against intruders. The second floor









contains formal rooms - salon, dinning room and sitting room, all of which are interconnected, the large dinning room itself being connected with the kitchen, pantry and bakery, bathrooms. The bedrooms are placed around a central corridor, and at the farthest part of the house is a purpose built maternity room. The interior walls are rendered in a soft white plaster framed by wood carvings, providing space for numerous paintings, hand made weaving, the floor coverings also being colorful hand made wool weavings.

It is a great example of how life in the 17th century could have obviously

been very comfortable in a house such as this.

## **Education and schooling**

As with any successful culture the value of education was well recognized, and from its earliest days Arbanassi had well organized







*High meeting of Bishops 17th C.*

structures for learning. Initially the primary schools ( or Kilini ) were housed in the grounds of the churches, and provided a comprehensive classical Greek instruction in language and the known sciences, with the names of well know teachers ( Daskalii ) engraved on local church walls (perhaps with less flattering contributions from a hard pressed student of ancient Greek?)









Interior of the Church of the Birth of Christ





*Fresco detail from Church of the Birth of Christ 16th C.*

By the 18th century great support from the wealthy community provided purpose built schools, and teachers from foreign schools brought in to extend the curriculum. The multi cultural aspect is shown by the evidence of a document from 1732 that shows that Romanian leader Konstantin Nikolai financed a Greek school with grading through to highly specialized academic levels, and in 1779 another leader, Alexander Brakovianu issued the authority for a similar school to be established and continuously financed by the state treasury.



## **The Clans and Families**

To this day representatives of the families which have roots in the byzantine era still live in Arbanassi. Families with old names such as Trendafil, Kantakuzin, Bratiano are living within Arbanassi today, and have links for example to the Romanian leader Brankovianu, and direct decent to family members buried in the church grounds of "Sveti Archangel Michail and Gavril".



*Fresco detail from Church of the Birth of Christ 17th C.*





Fresco detail of the "Tree of the family of Christ"

The Kantakuzin family has its old coat of arms engraved in a fresco within the church of "Rodestvo Hristov" or "the Birth of Christ", from the period around the 1790's.

It is well established that the Kochi family originated from Arbanassi, and within a few generations a Kochi was the leader of Moldova from 1634 to 1653. From one of the original families of Arbanassi came the brothers Evlogi and Christo Georgiev, well known as pioneers of the Bulgarian renaissance and literary legend in Bulgaria.

Toma Kudgaliev and Ilarion Dragostinov were revolutionary figures that trace their roots back to Arbanassi.



## **The Churches of Arbanassi**

As a Christian settlement, the church was a prime figure in both the development and definition of Arbanassi. From the church came the Greek language, the idea of formal learning and education which, for the time, survived the Moslem invasion, and formed the basis for much of the religious back ground of Eastern Europe today.

Some seven churches survive today as an indication of the strength of the faith of the people of Arbanassi, to not only build, but preserve the structures and traditions



*Fresco detail of the Priory*





Fresco in the chapel Sveti Ioan Krustitel





Altar doors to the chapel Sveti Ivan Krstitelj

of the Christian faith within a Moslem world.

Those churches are -

1 - Rodestsvo Hristovo -  
"The Birth of Christ"

2 - " Saint Dimitur "

3- "The Saint of Archangel Michail  
& Gavril"

4 - " Saint Atanasii "

5 - " Saint George "

6 - "Holy Mother of God "

7 - "Saint Nikola "

These numbers refer to the map on  
Page 47

"Sveti Atanasie" fresco 17th C.





*"Sveti Atanasie" fresco 17th C.*

Much of the large part that the church plays in the history of Arbanassi can traced to the Turnovo region, indeed the initiative and decoration of the churches belongs to the eminent Bishops of Turnovo, such as Gerasim the Second, Nikifor, Atenasii, who pioneered the establishment of Eastern Orthodox themes throughout Eastern Europe.



Arbanassi was an interesting development to Christian leaders of that time, as much of the Christian faith had been persecuted and removed from everyday life under the Ottoman Empire, so a particular focus of their attention was the Church of The Birth of Christ. Over many years there was continuous work on the renovation and decoration of the church to become a Christian shrine in what were considered non-Christian lands.

That church became the focus of religious art, and some of the murals that adorn the walls of this church represent over eighty years continuous



**"Sveti Atanasie" fresco 17th C.**

*"Saint Archangel Michail Gavriall" Mural of Patrons*





*"Sveti Atanasie" chapel fresco 18th C.*

work by many artists that literally lived and died in producing these murals. Another highlight is the carved altar and surrounds that are treated with gold leaf, depicting the tree of Christ, a work of stunning size and complexity. The rest of the church is filled with icons and other murals that are not only typical, but the best preserved of such Christian art of the period.

This is not to neglect the other churches in Arbanassi, which while having the same architectural form, contain a wealth of mural and iconography that is





" Saint Archangel Michail Gavriail " Mural of Patrons





" Saint Archangel Michail Gavriail " Interior





*" Saint Archangel Michail Gavriail " ceiling detail*

the very best representation of post Byzantine religious art in the Balkans.

These churches also contain art from the masters of Aton, such as the church of "Sveti Atanasie", whose frescos date from 1667, and show great similarities to monuments and religious architecture from Greece and Crete.

In the church of "Saint Archangel Michail and Gavrail" we see late 16th century artwork sponsored by the wife of Niku Kutukli, Kiriaky, who had undertaken a pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem. Such was her enthusiasm, she enlisted the artists Georgi from Bucharest, and Michhail from Thessalonika to adorn the dome of the





"Saint Archangel Mi" "Saint Dimitur" Chapel





Vestry Icon wall





Monastery "Uspenie Bogodorichno"





**Monastery "Saint Nikola"**

Detail of "The Circle of Life" mural





Detail of "The Circle of Life" mural



church in what is a great example predating other frescos utilizing the same perspective technique in Western Europe.

The frescos in the Church of Saint Dimitur, finished late 1621, are simply the finest achievements of late middle age mural work to be found in Europe, and so are unique in their preservation and condition.

Arbanassi also held an attraction for those who required a retreat from the ways of the world, and the monasteries of "Uspenie Bogorodichno" and "Saint Nikola" which still remain today as places of quiet contemplation.

Under the territory of Arbanasi there are two monasteries "Uspenie Bogorodichni" and "Sveti Nikola". It is not clear when the hostel was established, but the chapel is the oldest building within the priory, established 1680. By colours style and type, the frescos are similar to







*" Saint Bogoditca Troeruchitca" Icon of the miracles*

the church "Church of the Birth of Christ".

The chapel of "Sveti Nikola" was in active use until the raid on Arbanasi in 1798, which left the buildings partially destroyed, but renovation took place 1808 to its original form, and by 1833 the monastery complex was well established. In the vestibule, some of the origin frescos are still to be seen, along with a variety of wood carvings. Both monasteries are in active use today.

## **Special Events**

### **and places**

**The Miracle of the Church of the Birth of Christ**

In the Eastern Orthodox calender, Easter is one

*Detail of "The Circle of Life" mural*



of the largest celebration of the Christian faith, and at this time many of the faithful make their way to this church, as legend has it that on Easter Saturday water appears on the sacred throne (the altar), which the faithful believe has miraculous powers of healing. They take a few drops of this to relieve illness and pain, and it is said if the water remains until the sun rises the following day, it is a sign of God's blessing and a prosperous year for all ahead.

### **The Circle of Life**

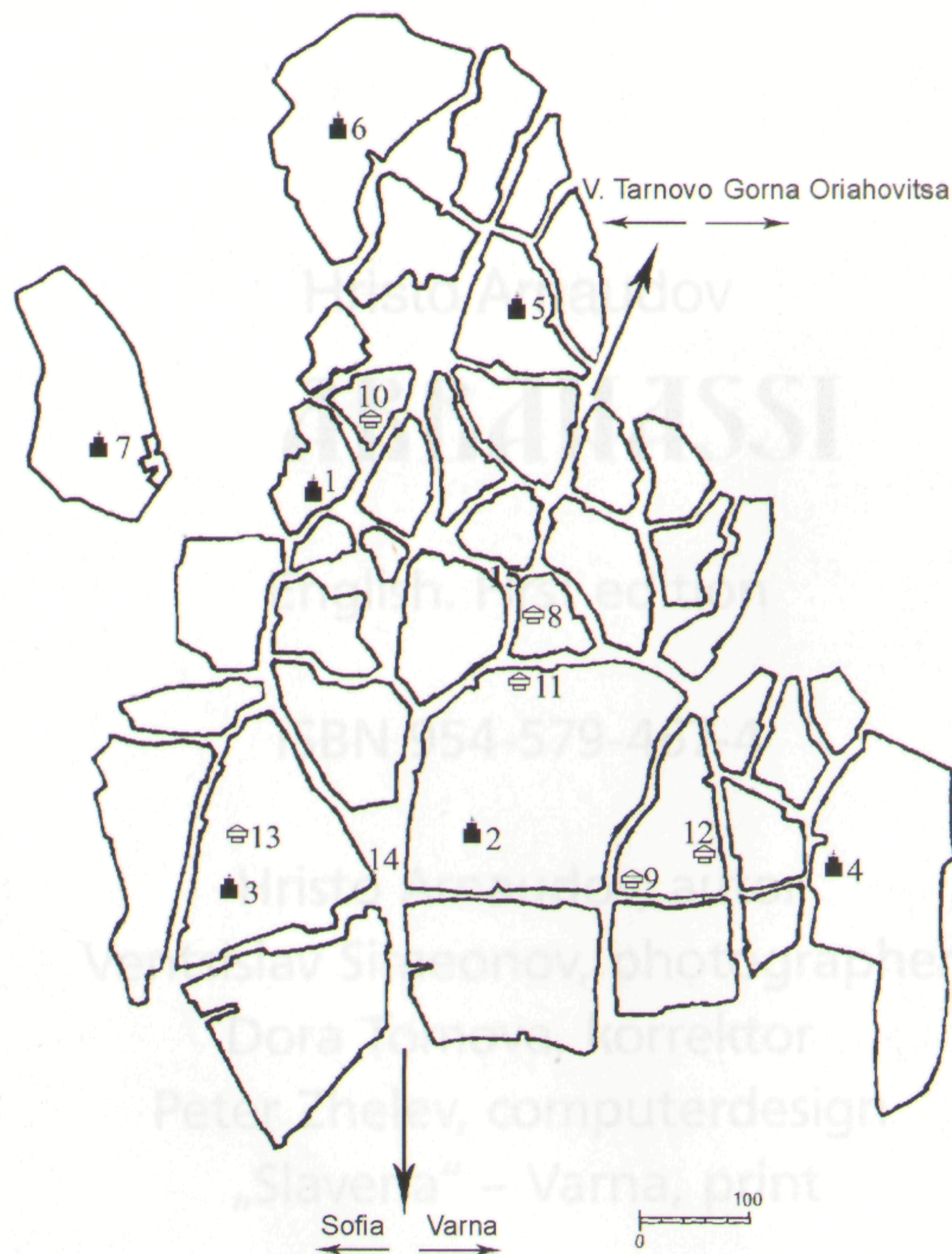
In the same Church, on the East wall of the loft is placed a most unusual mural depicting "The Circle of Life" with all signs of the zodiac making up a circle around a face which is a depiction of Christ. Around that are four naked figures representing the four seasons, and yet again around that is the representation of twelve human figures lying in a clockwise direction. On a wider circumference are nine figures holding staffs of equal length encircling the entire mural. In the first half the figures represent the growth cycle of life, the second half showing the decline and final end of this mortal life, with an interesting inscription.

This complicated composition would seem to owe much to Far Eastern philosophy, but with a focus on the life of Christ, and is a most unusual find in a Christian church. It has a particular mystery that enchants the viewer for many a time after.









1. Rodestsvo Hristovo - "The Birth of Christ"
2. " Saint Dimitur"
3. " The Saint of Archangel Michail & Gavril"
4. " Saint Atanasii"
5. " Saint George "
6. "Holy Mother of God "
7. "Saint Nikola "

8. Konstantcilieva house
9. Hadgiilieva house
10. The house of Priest Panaiot
11. Kandilarova house
12. House of Baba Kali
13. House of Niku Kultukli
14. Market public fountain

15. Kokonska public fountain



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